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ABSTRACT

A critique is presented of naturalistic inquiry as a scholarly activity or as an alternative research paradigm directed toward extending knowledge of physical education curriculum and instruction. Four questions are posed: (1) What is the value perspective of naturalistic inquiry? (2) What are the phenomena of interest? (3) What are the customs/rules of inquiry? and (4) How does it affect practice? Each of these questions is examined as it pertains to investigation and research in the field of curriculum design and development and instructional approaches in physical education. It is concluded that the predominant value perspective of naturalistic inquiry is humanistic and that the phenomena of major interest are the holistic nature of curriculum and instruction, the curriculum process, and contextual variables. It is also concluded that its rules of inquiry are those of qualitative approaches of the social sciences, with particular attention to the investigator as the research instrument and that its major effects on practice will be increased attention to theory-building and broadening of the focus of concern. (JD)

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Naturalistic Inquiry: A Theoretical Perspective*

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I've been involved in curriculum study for more than a quarter of a century. I thought I was reasonably familiar with the jargon. But when I sat down to develop a conceptual framework for planning this presentation, before I had received the three papers to be presented as Part I, with the preliminary titles as guidance, I really panicked. Naturalistic inquiry? School ethnography? Qualitative approach? Theorizing about pedagogy? Etic investigation? What are my criteria for critiquing papers on these topics? Where do I go from there?

During the current academic year, I have sought approval for a new advanced graduate course entitled "Curriculum Inquiry in Physical Education." One of the stumbling blocks was the title. My colleagues desired an interpretation of how inquiry differed from research. The truth is that I could have used the word research if they accepted and accorded respect to more than one paradigm for research in physical education. But this points up the problem which Earls (1983: 2) identified that the dominant research paradigm is still the experimental model drawn from the natural sciences.

At this point, we have had considerable orientation to the phrase "naturalistic inquiry." For the record, my definition is "investigation of curricular phenomena in the real-world setting." It is emic research rather than etic research in that one does not impose a predetermined structure upon the data collector. Qualitative analysis predominates over quantitative analysis since the data facilitate logical problem-solving more appropriately than enumeration or correlation. Ethnography is one of several methodological approaches useful in naturalistic inquiry.

The next challenge is to clarify "a theoretical perspective." I suppose I was invited to accept this assignment because there is almost nobody else in physical

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education who is willing to be labeled a "curriculum theorist." It's somewhat parallel to Paul Zimmer's response to identifying himself as a poet. Paul Zimmer is the Director of the University of Georgia Press; he is also a very successful poet who has published more than a half-dozen books of poetry. He was the speaker at the awards dinner to honor the recipients of the 1983 University of Georgia Creative Research Awards last month and introduced his poetry reading with tales of his interactions on airplane trips when traveling companions asked, "What's

your game?" Most of the time he reports that he is a book publisher, which of course he is. When he chooses to respond that he is a poet, the typical reaction is discomfort, uneasiness, and a return to the Jacquelyn SuZann book in which the traveler was buried initially. I was reminded that in my early days of air travel to professional meetings, I used to try to size up my next-seat neighbor to determine whether I would respond that I was a physical education professor and open up the inevitable expressions of shock and questions about graduate study in physical education or play it safe and try teacher or just plain professor. Zimmer says that when he feels particularly frisky he doesn't settle for just poet, but identifies himself as a lyric poet. That's like saying to physical educators, not just that my specialization is curriculum, but that I'm a curriculum theorist.

So how does a curriculum theorist critique naturalistic inquiry? I need to make it clear that I do not intend to offer specific scholarly reactions to each of the three excellent papers presented this morning. What I will attempt to do is to critique what I understand to be naturalistic inquiry as a scholarly activity or an alternative research paradigm directed toward extending knowledge of physical education curriculum and instruction. My theoretical perspective of naturalistic inquiry will be summarized by posing four questions: (1) What is the value perspective? (2) What are the phenomena of interest? (3) What are the customs/rules of inquiry? (4) How does it affect practice? These seem to me to be appropriate questions for critiquing a proposed approach to the scholarly study of curriculum.

What is the value perspective? Of the several value orientations identified and variously labelled by curricularists, those most frequently reflected in naturalistic inquiry are self-actualization and social reconstruction. From a self-actualization or humanistic perspective, the function of the curriculum is viewed as a process of self-discovery, synthesis and personal integration. What is good for the individual person takes priority over social demands or subject-matter integrity. As Earls (1983: 2) pointed out, naturalistic inquiry is based

on a view of teachers and students which predisposes the researcher to seek to understand events from the perspective of the person affected. Humans attach meaning to events; their actions are influenced by personal perceptions, purposes and social contexts. Harrington's (1983) ethnographic studies reflect an assumption that the personal meanings of all of the participants in the interaction in the gymnasium are relevant.

Pedagogical researchers holding a social reconstruction perspective toward schooling have been responsible for developing many of the techniques of naturalistic inquiry. Their primary motive is political and their impact on the physical education curriculum in this country has been minimal. Curriculum reconceptualists like Apple, Mann, Pinar, and Giroux come from fields like social science, psychology, philosophy and political science, not physical education.

Naturalistic inquiry is particularly appropriate as well to a value perspective which I have chosen to designate as ecological validity. The individual is viewed as a holistic entity integrated within a particular environment. The function of the curriculum from the perspective of ecological validity is to understand humankind in its biological relationships with the physical environment and its potential for a globally interdependent society based on an ecosystem of both biological and sociological balances. The curriculum researcher is interested in the individual person in interaction with both the physical and social environment in his or her particular place and time. Earls noted that naturalistic researchers attend to natural subjects in natural settings. "Ecological validity requires preservation of the natural setting. Contextual validity refers to the observation of natural activities in natural settings." (Earls, 1983:8)

What are the phenomena of interest? If we acknowledge that the majority of naturalistic researchers take a value perspective that is some variation of a humanistic philosophical orientation, it is not surprising that the phenomena of primary interest are the holistic nature of curriculum and instruction, the

ongoing curriculum development process, and the contextual variables influencing natural events. In naturalistic inquiry the focus is on complex human social processes as wholes. What is the curriculum like when viewed as a whole? How can the total experience of the students be described? The researcher is interested in the full range and blend of meanings and perceptions, including those often designated as the "hidden curriculum." Curriculum cannot be separated from instruction; neither can be viewed as independent of the so-called "hidden" aspects; and evaluation is an integral part of the whole. The emphasis is on studying the action as a whole, rather than upon isolating specific features for microscopic examination. A deliberate attempt is made to maintain a broad focus and to avoid preoccupation with limited or narrow variables or categories for observation and interpretation.

A second focus for study is the curriculum development process itself. For purposes of analysis, we often view curriculum and instruction as two complementary thrusts in the educational enterprise. But in the real world they constitute a single highly complex ongoing dynamic process. In naturalistic inquiry the investigator seeks to understand this dynamic process in which each of the actors and the inter-relationships of all of the elements are constantly changing.

Contextual variables are the third type of phenomena of particular interest to the naturalistic researcher. Since the scholar's concern is with social processes as they naturally occur, it is essential to keep the situational setting in focus. Curriculum activity and the impact of the dominant instructional strategies can be understood only with knowledge and appreciation of the total context in which they occur. Harrington states, "The underlying assumption is that the activities in the gymnasium do not take place in isolation from the milieu which is the school." (1983:6) Consequently, it is important to analyze attendance expectations, class assignment strategies, the presence or absence of a dress code, disciplinary procedures, student activities opportunities, the impact of

school athletic programs, grading practices, the school status system, and similar contextual variables in order to interpret the curriculum experience of any group of physical education students.

What are the rules or customs of inquiry? In critiquing an alternative research paradigm, the methodological question may well be the most important. What are the established and accepted customs of the researchers who use this paradigm? What rules must we accept to guide our scholarly inquiry if we intend to establish a tradition of naturalistic inquiry? I suggest four points as my response to this question. First, naturalistic inquiry is based on the research methods and traditions of social science, especially cultural anthropology. Field studies which go back to the early work of Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Frank Boaz were the precursors of modern ethnography. Ethnographic techniques require us to study human social processes from a holistic perspective and in natural settings. The naturalistic inquirer in physical education will need to give primary loyalty to the rules of social science research rather than to those of experimental research which dominates in the natural sciences.

Secondly, naturalistic inquiry depends upon narrative description and qualitative analysis. Simple descriptive statistics are sometimes used, but interpretation of educational significance is heavily dependent upon qualitative analysis. Specific interactions observed become significant in a context of dependable description of the social network and its regulatory customs. Willis (1978:20) has provided an excellent statement comparing qualitative and quantitative methods. In introducing an essay by Travers, he states:

> The essential difference between quantitative and qualitative methods is not measurement, since both involve observation and inference. Rather, inference in quantitative studies depends on a logic of enumeration of observed characteristics, while inference in qualitative studies depends on a logic of direct comparison of characteristics. Moreover, the essence of a science is the ability to think logically in formulating conceptions of the universe. Sciences, therefore, include conceptions formulated through qualitative inference, and many such conceptions have advanced modern science.

Qualitative analysis need not be considered unscientific; it simply utilizes a different kind of logic.

A third rule in naturalistic inquiry is that one must accept the inquirer as the instrument. The researcher must develop the perceptions, insights, and skills to serve as his or her own primary research tool. The method is inductive and the categories for interpretation and analysis emerge only after observation, thus being totally dependent upon the observer's own value perspective, academic background, understanding, and professional skills. Much of the data is collected through observation techniques and in-depth interviews; both procedures use the investigator as the research instrument in a very real sense.

The fourth point I wish to make concerning the rules of naturalistic inquiry is that validity is typically of greater concern than reliability. Internal validity is potentially high because of extensive data collection and detailed analysis. Emphasis on observation of natural activities in natural settings enhances ecological and contextual validity. Generalizability, on the other hand, is inherently difficult in this type of research and naturalistic researchers are usually very conservative in asserting claims for generalizability.

How does it affect practice? It may be too soon to ask the fourth and final question I have posed for discussing naturalistic inquiry as a research paradigm for curriculum study. However, there are some things we know from studies in other subject field areas and from the relatively few physical education investigations to date. Naturalistic inquiry is likely to stimulate more interest in theorizing and to support sounder theory-building. The ethnographic method which discourages the use of already structured category systems and delays decisions about categories for observation and interpretation is inherently theory-generating. I see no possibility that the paradigm can be used without increasing our sophistication in examining current curricular and instructional theory.

An increase in naturalistic inquiry in physical education should hel with a continuing problem frequently noted by researchers of physical education curriculum and teaching. There has been a tendency to focus research on problems of limited scope, and a consequent growing uneasiness about whether we are giving enough attention to those things which are truly important. A shift to a paradigm that does not limit us to studying those things which can be measured mathematically or demonstrated to be statistically significant might free us to direct more of our energy to the analysis of factors which we believe philosophically and logically to be of genuine educational significance.

These developments in naturalistic inquiry will surely have an impact on professional preparation as well. We should be able to progress to the development of concepts of success in teaching which go beyond the busy-happy-good syndrome suggested by Placek in synthesizing her findings that teachers studied viewed themselves as successful if their students were busy, happy and good. (Big Ten Conference on Research on Teaching, 1982) All future teachers will need to be prepared as skillful observers of the holistic curriculum process and of teachers and students interacting in real-world settings. I suspect that undergraduates will have to learn basic skills of qualitative analysis, just as they are now expected to understand the curve of normal distribution, mean, standard deviation, and formative and summative evaluation. Any paradigm shift requires conscious planned preparation.

In critiquing naturalistic inquiry from a theoretical perspective, I have concluded that its predominant value perspective is humanistic; that the phenomena of major interest are the holistic nature of curriculum and instruction, the curriculum process and contextual variables; that its rules of inquiry are those of the qualitative approaches of the social sciences with particular attention to the investigator as the research instrument; and that its major effects on practice will be increased attention to theory-building and broadening of the

focus of concern. For me these generalizations add up to a conclusion that it is an alternative paradigm with very real potential for progress in research in physical education curriculum and teaching. We should be looking for a paradigm shift. There has been an overreliance on the scientific method. We do need to overcome our singlemindedness and to be open to more than one style of inquiry.

I want to commend our elected leaders of the Curriculum and Instruction Academy on the program directions last year and this year. Last year we had the opportunity to view and compare a variety of research approaches in curriculum and instruction; this year we have taken an indepth look at one of the newest and potentially most viable methods of curriculum inquiry. I believe the Academy has come of age. It is quite possible that the introduction of naturalistic inquiry into the mainstream of our research endeavors may prove to be a true landmark and that 1983 will mark a real move into tomorrow.

I can't resist the temptation to point out that we've come a long way. It was a major advance from the studies of traits of successful teachers by A. S. Barr and others to the descriptive analytic research using various observation category systems to identify the cold hard facts of dyadic teacher-student interaction. It may be an even greater leap to acceptance by our community of scholars of a research consortium relying on several styles of inquiry, thus opening the way for some of us to a paradigm shift in a profession in which all research traditions have equal rights and equal access to sources of power. (Earls, 1983: 3)

We have come a long way. To put it in personal terms, I wrote a dissertation at Stanford University during what most of you would consider the dark ages under the direction of Robert Bush in an exciting area which was then known as teacher-pupil relationships. The data were tabulated by hand on large sheets of wrapping paper. I borrowed a book on statistics by McNemar and cranked out biserial correlations on a calculator. What I now find most interesting to

reflect upon, however, is my work as a research assistant on the staff of the Stanford Consultation Service. I went into the classrooms of teachers who had requested analysis of their teaching and recorded unstructured observations of what I perceived to be happening during the class period. The staff members who used the data (data collected by me together with data from many other sources) to advise and counsel the teachers included, among others, Bush who was one of the early leaders in human relations research, Colidarci who was a pioneer in studies of group dynamics, and Spindler whom Earls identified as the generally recognized "founder of educational anthropology."

About ten years ago, American physical education researchers began to notice some of the work by British and European colleagues which used naturalistic strategies. Now even our own stars in teacher behavior research are acknowledging the need for a broader perspective and for alternative research paradigms. These are all encouraging developments. To me, one of the most important aspects of the current scene is expressed in this quote which I have chosen as a conclusion. It is from Eisner's foreword to the first book devoted entirely to qualitative methods in educational evaluation, a 1978 publication by George Willis, entitled Qualitative Evaluation.

> It is significant that such a large number of the contributors to this volume are people at the beginning of their careers in education. These are individuals who have twenty to thirty years ahead of them in the field and who are helping to open up some new vistas and develop some new approaches to educational evaluation. Several of them will, I am confident, provide much of the leadership in the field. And their students will develop even further the work that they helped to advance. In the last analysis, the forms that can be used to conceptualize, express, and understand the world are limitless, since human capacity itself seems to be shaped by the fruits of the imagination as they influence culture. Up to now we have barely scratched the surface of possibility. But scratch we have, and I believe some new leads have been found.

We have found some new tools for our inquiry into physical education curriculum and instruction. We have among us competent young energetic researchers with 20 to 30 years ahead of them. Now, let us get on with the digging.

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